

10 YEARS OF KOLOS IN CALIFORNIA

1945 — 1955

JOHN FILCICH

Kolos have come long way in the past decade — from being looked upon as a curiosity to being able to compel people to drive hundreds of miles for “just kolos”. There was very little, if any, kolo dancing among Yugoslav ethnic groups on the West Coast before the War. Polkas and waltzes were their favorite dances. The reason is simple: nearly all the Yugoslavs on the Coast come from Dalmatia and the coasts of Hercegovina and Montenegro, where kolos and tamburitza orchestras, as we know them, do not exist. Immigrants from the “kolo country” (Slavonia, Vojvodina, and Serbia) settled in the Midwest and Eastern United States. Perhaps the most outstanding achievement in the kolo field at that time took place at the San Francisco World's Fair in 1939 when an ethnic group from Sacramento performed the “Srpkinja” as part of the Yugoslav program.

Folk dancers first learned about kolos in 1945 through the efforts of two service men stationed at Treasure Island, Marine Phil Hodak and Milan Palaski, who was in the Navy. They came from two good kolo cities, Detroit and Chicago respectively and missed in California the usual kolo dancing they enjoyed at home. After attending some local affairs they gathered together a group of young Yugoslavs — mostly girls, since the men were in the service — and met at the Slovenian Hall in San Francisco once a week. They soon found themselves frequently exhibiting at ethnic and “war-effort” programs.

It was at such an exhibition that they were “discovered” by Marvin Hartfield, a true folklorist whose contributions to our folk dance movement over the years have been very beneficial. Mr. Hartfield often engaged in working with ethnic groups of all nationalities, encouraging them to learn and propagate the dances and other facets of their folklore, assisting them in every way possible. (Such a valuable help the writer recollects receiving during his early start in 1948.) Marvin persuaded the exhibiting group led by Phil and Milan to demonstrate and teach kolos at Changs International Folk Dance Club. This outstanding organization thereby became the first folk dance group to add kolos to its repertoire; Chang's was also the first to hold a kolo class on the West Coast, one evening a week being devoted to kolos alone. Prominent in the field at this early date, in addition to Phil, Milan and Marvin were the Lenshaws, Bob and Millie Vuksich, Ada Harris, Virgil Morton, Walter Grothe and Buzz Glass amongst others. The kolos that were popular then were the old standards, Seljančica, Milica, Žikino, Kukunješte and Kozačko Kolos.

Sometime after the War had been over Phil returned to Detroit (where the writer was lucky enough to meet him last year — dancing kolos) and Milan made Palo Alto his home. Joining the Palomanians, Milan taught a new kolo, Nebesko Kolo. The group performed the dance at the Oakland Festival on December 12th, 1947. This was the first and last festival that the writer attended as a spectator and the one which prompted him to take up folk dancing. After six months or so of general folk dancing the writer's complete attention began to center on kolos, having remembered them somewhat as a boy in Gary, Indiana. Contrary to popular belief, he did not learn them in Yugoslavia or even “back East”, but right here in the Bay Area — partly from the few teachers who knew them somewhat, partly from Easterners living here, but to a large extent by continual research and hours of practice.

By the fall of 1948 we had organized our first ethnic group which came about due to the necessity of having a Yugoslav contribution for the Festival of Nations in Oakland (now a bi-annual event). The following year the writer was asked to continue with the ethnic group that Phil and Milan had led in San Francisco at the Croatian Church. Before long regular trips were made to Sacramento and Lodi in addition to the Bay Area groups. Activity was confined to these ethnic groups, the only kolo being done at folk dance clubs was Nebesko.

It was not until the Stockton Folk Dance Camp of 1950 that kolos made a dent in folk dance circles. There was no demand for them, but Camp Director Lawton Harris was both able to predict their eventual popularity and considerate enough to schedule the teaching of kolos at one hour sessions each day of Camp. During one assembly hour Vyts delivered a talk on the kolos and their background, using Milica Ristich and the writer to assist him in demonstrating several kolos. Eight kolos were taught, including the introduction of Rumunjsko which became an immediate “hit”, doubling the kolo repertoire of most groups. Kolos have had a definite place at all Stockton Camp sessions since then. Michael and Mary Ann Herman were on the faculty in 1951 and introduced several new kolos as part of their schedule.

With the introduction of Rumunjsko Kolo in 1950, kolos began to win new fans each time they were done at folk dance groups. New and more adequate recordings became available adding variety to the repertoire and challenging us to learn their steps. About this time the hub of kolo dancing was Castro Hall in San Francisco, at that time engaged by Grace San Filippo who has always favored kolos, Greek and other Balkan dances. We held classes Wednesdays, Thursdays, and the weekly parties on Saturdays were very popular.

It was in the fall of 1952 that an unfortunate situation gave us the impetus to sponsor something which has since become a permanent institution, the height of kolo activity in the West: Annual Kolo Festival. Vyts Beliajus was recuperating from a severe illness and groups everywhere were sponsoring affairs for his benefit. We thought of holding a Kolo Festival to do our part. It was a two-day affair held over Thanksgiving week-end and patterned generally after an ethnic activity. The attendance, both ethnic and folk-dancer, coupled with the success and enthusiasm was such as to make similar affairs inevitable.

Exactly one year later, at an even larger Kolo Festival, many hearts were glad to see Vyts able to attend in person and even to conduct a folk dance Institute as well. Some 800 enthusiasts participated and danced three days to the music of the well-known and liked Črlenica Brothers Tamburitza Orchestra of Los Angeles. Many “converts” were won to kolos by the Orchestra, the latter amazed at the never-tiring enthusiasm of the folk dancers and their ability to dance “every one” of the thirty-odd kolos then in the Orchestra's repertoire! Another kolo hit was born that weekend, the Makedonka, which Vyts introduced at that festival.

Each year the Kolo Festival has grown with the addition of another day. In 1953 we added Friday; last year enthusiasts drove night and day from such far away places as San Diego, Los Angeles, Oregon and Seattle, Washington to attend the opening party on the Thursday night. This year we are having a little pre-festival party at Madelyne Greene's Studio on the Wednesday night, mostly as a warm-up for local participants, as the out-of-town dancers are not expected until Thursday evening.

Kolo Classes in San Francisco have been constant. In 1952 they moved to the Yugoslav Sokol Hall which has since become the “kolo” hall. A beginner's class was held Wednesdays while intermediate kolos were taught Thurs-



Hope and Tony Bazdarich, kolo leaders in the L. A. area, shown in elaborately embroidered Croat costumes from near Zagreb. (Foto Ace Smith)

days. From the latter we formed an exhibition group, the Balkan Dancers, in existence to this day. Thursday nights have become “kolo nights” in San Francisco. Today the Sokol Hall classes continue with another John, another kolo enthusiast who entered the kolo field as a folk dancer, and who has worked hard learning and mastering the kolos, John Skow, a non-Yugoslav.

Kolo dancing of a highly polished exhibitional and theatrical nature was added in 1951 with the arrival of Anatol Joukowsky from Europe. The Joukowskys were prominent in the ballet and folk-character field of dancing in pre-war Yugoslavia, later living and performing in Paris and London. Joukowsky (“Mr. J.” as he is popularly known) first taught our original Yugoslav group several new dances — the Bosnian Čarlama and several Croatian Drmeshes — which we first performed for the Croatian Fraternal Union Convention in Los Angeles.

The contributions of your editor, Vyts, cannot be overlooked. Even before our “ten years” started, he was teaching kolos “fullblast” in and around Chicago — first having learned them from native Yugoslavs, then teaching them to the “second-generation”, as well as to his early folk dance groups. His first West Coast tour was in 1949 when he went as far north as Oregon and Washington. Actually places like Corvallis Portland, Seattle and Enumclaw first heard of and learned kolos from Vyts. Since then he has made Southern California quite kolo conscious, with San Diego virtually kolo-crazy! He taught us a few kolos back in 1949 and has since then been very helpful in an advisory capacity and which his typical moral support.

The kolo picture in Southern California follows to a great degree that of the Bay Area. The first kolos taught there introduced by Paul Erfer who brought them from New York, together with his large folk dance repertoire and vast folklore knowledge. Two years ago Zdenka Politeo, formerly a member of the Jože Vlagovič dance group in Yugoslavia, was discovered in San Pedro by Anthony Bazdarich who invited her to teach his group in Los Angeles. “Tony” conducted regular kolo class in Los Angeles, as well as directing an exhibition group. Earlier this year his group sponsored a very well attended and spirited Kolo Festival Angeles. Kolos are popular with most Southern California which we hope will become an annual spring affair in Los groups today, and a place where they are sure to be found is at the meeting place of the “Gandy Dancers”, a group that has been very loyal to Balkan dances.

For many years we had a folk dance program over Station KLOK capably directed by Jane Molinari; it was a rare Saturday that we did not have at least one kolo aired — complete with historic background notes or an interesting folk anecdote. The Yugoslav Radio Program over the same station has many kolo fans in its audience listening to its songs and dances and hearing announcements of interest to them.

One of the best means of introducing kolos to the greatest number of people and promoting them in outlying cities was the institution of the “Kolo Hour”. While planning the 1954 March Festival in San Francisco (the first “Pageant Festival”) Chairman Frank Moore thought of the idea of a one-hour program of kolos as a link to join the afternoon and evening programs, making the Festival a continuous one. It was a surprise to many to see such a great number of enthusiastic dancers remain for the kolo period, notwithstanding that it was the dinner-hour! The idea was not to die there, but has been used at fifteen of the eighteen monthly festivals since that first Kolo Hour.

Music is the most important requisit for any type of dancing, and it is in the field of kolos that we turning from records to live tamburitza music at larger parties and Festivals. On the West Coast there are some ten tamburitza orchestras all of which are composed of first or second generation Yugoslav-Americans, save one. This group, the “Ruza Tamburitza Orchestra” of San Francisco is, to the best of our knowledge, the only non-Yugoslav tamburitza orchestra anywhere. It is composed of young men from our “Balkan Dancers” who were inspired by the kolo movement to channel their talents in this constructive and highly beneficial manner. They now provide live music for many parties, dances, and the Annual Kolo Festival, as well as playing for “the Balkan Dancers” during their exhibitions. The troupe is directed by William Blazeovich, an outstanding ethnic leader in San Francisco who has been actively engaged in cultural, musical and folklore work for many years. “Bil” now directs a total of three tamburitza groups, also including the CFU Men's orchestra and an all-girl unit.

Just as the Stockton Folk Dance Camp gave kolos the first good shot-in-the-arm, so again is it responsible for the latest booster shot. On the faculty this year was Dick Crum, dance choreographer and director of the Duquesne University Tamburitians. Dick brought to us a new concert of kolos, material fresh from his recent field trip to Yugoslavia and a storehouse full of interesting and vital bits of folklore information. Perhaps even of greater significance and importance than the dozen or so new dances that he introduced, was the introduction of singing. In Yugoslavia much of the dancing is accompanied by singing an occasional verse or two; many areas use the voice more than an instrument. Having been initiated to this new concept, we are now in the midst of a new wave of enthusiasm — copying and compiling verses in native Serbo-Croatian and learning to sing these kolo-songs while dancing. With this new innovation (hardly new in Yugoslavia) it is now possible to dance kolos without an orchestra or even a record-player around!

That is the picture in the last ten years as told me by people who were around the first few years and as experienced by me during more than a half of the latter part of the decade. No doubt a lot more can be said about the movement, and no doubt there have been other contributors not acknowledged in this article. To them we are grateful and thank them for their efforts as well as those mentioned in this ten-year chronology.

It is with a degree of complacency and great pleasure that we mark the forthcoming 1955 California Kolo Festival with the tenth anniversary of kolos in our folk dance movement.